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THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

X. ATONEMENT IN THE TEACHING OF PAUL (*Continued*)

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Pursuing still the plan of interpreting the less clear passages by those which are more clear,¹ we come to the obscure but unquestionably important statement of the apostle Paul in Gal. 3:13, 14:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree—that upon the Gentiles might come the blessing of Abraham; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

That the apostle employs the term "law" in this sentence in its legalistic sense, i. e., as denoting not the total revelation of the divine will, or the legislative portion of the Old Testament, but the strictly legalistic element of the Old Testament revelation, is a fact of fundamental importance for the discovery of his thought in this passage. That such is in fact the meaning of the word here even a study of the word as used repeatedly in this chapter of the epistle will make reasonably clear. Observe, for example, the antithesis in which the apostle sets the dictum of the law in vs. 10 and the Scripture doctrine of faith in vs. 11. Both are derived from the Old Testament, yet they directly contradict one another, and the apostle clearly regards the latter as that which is really revelatory of God's attitude toward men. Observe also the apostle's declaration in vs. 17, that the law cannot set aside the principle of faith that underlies the promise made long before to Abraham.² Law is in this sense, according to Paul's thought, an element of the divine revelation, but neither the whole of that revelation, nor its controlling element. It was just here that Paul differed from those pharisaically inclined thinkers whom he was opposing. They made law, in its strictly legalistic

¹ Cf. *Biblical World*, September, 1908, pp. 186 f.

² For fuller discussion of the usage of the word "law" in Paul and a detailed interpretation of Gal. 3:13, 14, see Burton, "Redemption from the Curse of the Law," *American Journal of Theology*, October, 1907, pp. 624-47.

sense, the whole or the determinative element of the divine revelation. To Paul it was a subordinate element of law, and the exaltation of it to the supreme place was an utter misrepresentation of God and a perversion of religion.

When it is clearly recognized in what sense Paul is using this term "law," then it follows that by "the curse of the law" he does not mean a curse which God veritably pronounces on every one "who continues not in all the things that are written in the book of the law to do them," for as vs. 10, 11 clearly show, he holds that the Old Testament itself affirms quite a different basis as that of the divine judgment. This curse is rather that which is pronounced by the purely legal element of the Old Testament when isolated and set off by itself. Such a declaration is not false. It has its value as disclosing to men where they stand when judged purely on the basis of their conduct, and is especially calculated to deter Paul's readers from adopting the legalistic view of his opponents, since on such a basis there could be for them only a curse for their non-conformity to all the statutes of the law. But they greatly err, the apostle clearly indicates, who think that such a curse of law truly represents God's attitude to men. He desires mercy and not sacrifice. Faith wins his approval, and for him who has faith there is no divine curse even though he has not fulfilled all the law's detailed requirements.

From this it follows further that redemption from the curse of the law is not forgiveness of sins, but deliverance of the mind from a misconception of God's attitude toward men. From the curse that God pronounces, only in the sense that in the law-element of his revelation he discloses to us our shortcomings, pointing out that judged on the basis of our own conduct we are indeed under a curse, from this curse which never expressed God's thought in full, which taken alone utterly misrepresents the attitude of God to men, men are redeemed when they learn at length, what the prophets perpetually affirmed, that God is not a bookkeeper, recording in his ledger the daily deeds of men and issuing his curse on those who fail in any requirement of the law, but a righteous God, loving righteousness in men, and faith by which men come into fellowship with him.

Precisely how the apostle conceived that this redemption from a

degrading and enslaving conception of God, Jesus wrought for us in that he died on the cross, he has not here clearly indicated, and it may not be possible for us with certainty to affirm. Yet there are two possible answers to this question which are suggested by the apostle's language elsewhere, and which are sufficient to account for the language of the present passage without the necessity of resorting to explanations which have no basis in his expressed thought. It is beyond question that the apostle looked upon the death of Jesus as a disclosure and demonstration of God's love for men.³ This thought alone may be the basis of his expression here. That God loves men, even sinful men, his enemies, as the death of Christ shows that he does love them, is itself a refutation of the conception that he is a mere legalistic judge of men, ignoring their striving, their aspiration, and their faith, and pronouncing on them a curse because they have failed to fulfil all the requirements of the law. But it is probable that this thought of the divine love, if it underlay the language of the apostle at this point, was supplemented in his mind by another, for it is beyond question that the apostle believed that Jesus himself was without sin (II Cor. 5:21). If then even he endured the cross, the climax of suffering and the extreme symbol of divine displeasure, it cannot be that it is the law of the divine government that each is dealt with on principles of legalistic justice. Look, you who think that God awards to each that joy or that pain which his punctilious fulfilment of statutes or his failure to fulfil them deserves; look at the cross of Christ, where he, the righteous, who knew no sin, died on the tree of cursing, *for us*, who had fallen far short of meeting the law's demands; and learn how widely you have missed the truth concerning God's real attitude toward men. There is certainly no more need here than in Rom. 3:24-26 to suppose that Paul thinks of Christ as veritably the object of divine displeasure, or as enduring a penalty transferred from sinful men to himself. That he suffers because of sin and on behalf of men has its sufficient explanation in his relation to God and to men, in consequence of which the pain of their sin falls on him. And that he who is the revealer and revelation of God does thus suffer itself disproves the whole legalistic conception of God.

³ See Rom. 5:9, 10; 8:31-38, and cf. *Biblical World*, September, 1908, pp. 189 ff.

Thus it appears that if we are guided by the apostle's own usage of words, and if we interpret his less clear assertions by those that are more clear, we find him thinking of the death of Jesus as vicarious in the sense that it is endured for the sake of men, as revelatory in that it discloses to men God's true attitude toward them, and as redemptive through the fact that it is thus revelatory. It is by the knowledge of God that men are redeemed; only of course such redemption becomes actual only as men accept and act upon the revelation of God thus given in Christ.

From this passage it is natural to turn to one in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we judge this; that one died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all that they who live might no longer live to themselves but to him that for them died and rose. . . . All things are from God that reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation, to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their transgressions; and committed to us the word of reconciliation. On behalf of Christ therefore we are ambassadors, as if God were entreating you through us. We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God. Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf that we might become righteousness of God in him (II Cor. 5:14, 15, 18-21).

Concerning this remarkable and remarkably interesting passage it must suffice to notice only those things which are strictly pertinent to our subject. Logically, if not also grammatically, the word "this" in vs. 14 is defined not by the immediately succeeding clause, but by all that follows to the end of vs. 15. In the death of Jesus, therefore, the apostle sees the supreme expression of the love of Christ, and in it all, for whom he thus suffered, are potentially and ought to be actually participative. The death that he died is ours, both in that it was for us, and in that it belongs to us to enter into it and share it with him, living no longer for the fulfilment of our own purposes and ends but for his, who for us died and rose again. Thus to the oft expressed thought that the death of Jesus is vicarious, on behalf of men, being an expression of his love for men, this passage adds that it is also representative, and of universal significance. It sets forth to men the ideal of their own life and appeals to them, moved by its manifestation of his love, to reproduce it in themselves. Similarly, in Rom. 6:10, 11, the apostle declares that as Jesus in his death died

to sin, utterly and finally repudiating it, so we ought to count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Both passages look at the death of Jesus as an act of profound moral significance, an act of righteousness on the part of Christ, mirroring for men their true attitude toward sin and righteousness. By its revelation of ideal human life the death of Jesus becomes redemptive.

But the Corinthian passage also represents Jesus as the revelation of God, and as in that revelation working atonement. God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. The addition of the words, "not imputing their transgressions unto them," added to lexicographical evidence not necessary to be cited here, shows that it is the laying aside of divine wrath rather than the overcoming of human hostility that the apostle has specially in mind when he speaks of the reconciliation of the world to God. This reconciliation is accomplished through the revelation of God in Christ; whether by a demonstration of his righteous hostility to sin (cf. Rom. 3:25 f.) or of his love (Rom. 5:8 f.) or through both, the passage does not clearly indicate. The most noteworthy fact is that it is through revelation that atonement is effected.

But this passage further presents Jesus—and we can scarcely be wrong in thinking that the apostle has specially in mind the death of Jesus—in yet a third aspect. "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf." It requires no argument to show that the expression "made to be sin" involves metonymy. To make a person to be sin, and that one become righteousness, are both alike impossible and unthinkable in a literal sense of the words. But it is almost as clear that the metonymy is double; that is, that the words do not mean that he made him sinful, caused him to sin. Such an idea is so far removed alike from Paul's idea of Jesus and of God as to be an impossible interpretation of his language. He can only mean that God made him to experience the effect of sin; not his own, for he had none, but that of others. The thought is clearly akin with that of Gal. 3:3. There is the same antithetical form of expression and the same kind of metonymy. That men might in him enter into the divine righteousness (whether in the strictly ethical sense, or in the forensic sense, is not needful to decide at this point) he entered into the experience of human sin, not indeed by sinning, but by

suffering even unto death, because of that sin. How such experience of sin enabled men to enter into the divine righteousness, the sentence itself leaves unsaid; but the most obvious suggestion of the context is that it was through the revelation of God that was thus made.

Two passages from the epistle to the Philippians, worthy in themselves of extended study, must be briefly considered:

And being found in fashion as a man he humbled himself, becoming obedient (to God) unto death, and that a death on the cross (Phil. 2:7, 8).

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed to his death, if so be I may attain unto the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:10).

These passages have in common the thought, intimated also in the earlier letters, that in his death Jesus is a pattern for his followers. For the first occurs in that remarkable statement concerning the self-abnegation of Christ, which is introduced by the words, "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus." And the second is part of the expression of the apostle's fervent longing after the achievement of that for which he had forsaken all and turned to Christ. The former passage affirms more explicitly than any previous one that Jesus in his death was obediently fulfilling the will of God, and goes on to add that for this God highly exalted him. It yields decisive disproof, if any were needed, that the apostle conceived of Jesus as being in his death in any sense the veritable object of divine wrath. The second passage joining together the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings as both alike to be experienced by the Christian and as alike conditions precedent to his own participation in the resurrection, confirm what Rom. 4:25 and 5:10 not obscurely suggest, that the final achievement of divine approval is attained not through any sacrifice of Christ as a fact external to the redeemed, or by faith as an enacted condition precedent to the ascription to the believer of an achieved merit of Christ, or by both of these combined, but by the dynamic of fellowship with Christ in that moral experience of which his death was the culmination. In that he died he died once for all to sin. In that he liveth he liveth unto God. This experience in all its essential moral elements must be repeated in him who is to attain unto atonement, i. e., reconciliation with God, and the sequel of it, resurrection

from the dead. That men might through him learn to know God and repeat in themselves this experience, for this Jesus, for love of men and on their behalf, was obedient even unto death, even that of the cross.

It is scarcely necessary to proceed further in the interpretation of what we have called the earlier Pauline epistles. Such passages as I Thess. 1:10; 4:14; Gal. 2:20; Rom. 4:25; 6:4 ff.; 8:3, etc., though raising many questions of detail, do but repeat, for the most part in less explicit form, the conceptions found in those which we have already examined.

No doubt the apostle often expresses his thought in language shaped by the current legalistic ideas or by his own formerly held, but now for the most part abandoned, legalistic conceptions. Yet when that language is carefully examined it yields a conception of the work of Christ in the reconciliation of God with men, which is ethical rather than legalistic. The fundamental significance of the death of Jesus, as Paul conceives of it, is in the revelation which it effects. It reveals the love of God for men and the righteousness of God, especially in its aspect of hostility to sin. This revelation of God, which makes manifest his essentially ethical character and attitude toward men, emancipates men from false ideas of God and provides a basis on which they may be freely forgiven by God. Yet this is only on condition of faith—and that too not arbitrarily, or as if faith were a quantitative complement of an expiation for sin effected through the death of Jesus, but on the ethical ground that the judgments of God are according to truth and God can approve as righteous only those who are fundamentally righteous. Approaching it from another point of view the death of Jesus reveals the ideal of human life. It is itself a moral act wherein is disclosed Jesus' own attitude to sin and the attitude which it belongs to all men to take. He who by faith in him accepts his principle of life enters into fellowship with him who died and rose again, dying with him to sin and rising with him to newness of life. They are reconciled to God and obtain divine approval who, accepting the revelation of God which begun in ages past reached its culmination in Jesus Christ, commit themselves in faith to him and become partakers of the life that was, and is, in him.

The letters to the Colossians and Ephesians⁴ affirm the pre-existence and pre-incarnate activity of the Christ and his function in creation and pre-Christian revelation with a clearness and emphasis not found in the earlier letters, and attach to his redemptive work a cosmic significance hardly expressed at all in them. But these differences affect but slightly their doctrine of atonement. Nor do the pastoral epistles, whatever their authorship, depart in any important way from the teaching of the unquestionably Pauline letters on this subject. In the interest of brevity, therefore, we may summarize the teaching of all these letters in one series of statements, indicating by the references which of the several elements are expressed in the several letters.

The Gentiles were before the coming of Christ, and, apart from their acceptance of Christ, remain alienated from God by evil works, hostile to him and objects of his wrath because of their sin. The Jews also were by nature children of wrath even as the rest (Col. 1:2; 2:3; 3:6; Eph. 2:3, 12, 13; I Tim. 1:13-16).

Yet men were at the same time, even in their sin, the objects of God's love. He was rich in mercy and loved us with a great love. The salvation of men is the work of divine grace; it is he that delivered us out of the power of darkness (Col. 1:3; 2:2, 3; Eph. 1:7; 2:4, 8; Tit. 3:4 ff.).

Jesus, himself the object of divine love, is also himself full of love for men. He is the Son of God's love, and the revelation of the Father, loving men with a love that passes knowledge (Col. 1:13, 15, 19; Eph. 2:4; 3:19).

The death of Jesus was an act of love on his part which was at the same time well-pleasing unto God (Eph. 5:2;⁵ 6:25; cf. I Tim.

⁴ Were it possible to discriminate with certainty between the Pauline and the later non-Pauline elements in those letters and the pastoral epistles, the non-Pauline would of course call for separate treatment. But in view of the difficulty of doing this, the wise course seems to be that which we have chosen, viz., treating first the quite certainly Pauline literature (II Thessalonians being for convenience grouped with the certainly Pauline or ignored) and then those which are open to doubt and in any case later. I cannot myself feel that the doubts respecting Colossians are justified. Ephesians is less certain, but this also seems to me more likely to be Paul's than not. The pastoral epistles seem pretty certainly compounded of Pauline and non-Pauline elements.

⁵ On this passage which is one of the few in which Paul uses sacrificial language, cf. T. K. Abbott, in the *International Critical Commentary*.

2:5, 6; Tit. 2:14). By this death the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile has been broken down. The bond written in ordinances has been blotted out and the believer in Christ is no longer subject to judgment in meat or drink or feast days, or Sabbath days. They who were once afar off are made nigh in the blood of Christ, he having abolished in his flesh the law of commandment. Through the cross both Jew and Gentile are reconciled to God (Col. 2:14-16; Eph. 1:13-22). But the purpose of Jesus' self-surrender to death is also stated in more personal and likewise in more distinctly ethical terms. He gave himself a ransom for all to redeem them from iniquity and to secure for them forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:21 f.; 2:13; Eph. 1:7; I Tim. 2:5, 6;⁶ Tit. 2:14). All this is in essential agreement with the doctrine of the earlier epistles, that Jesus is in his blood propitiatory through faith, that in him there is redemption, that justified through his death we are saved through his life, and that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to them that believe. Only there is now a strong emphasis upon the last-named thought and consequently on the inter-racial significance of Jesus' death as abolishing the partition between Jew and Gentile, both now having their access to God in the same way. It is important to observe that this result is achieved and the Gentiles come into possession of all the privileges of the Jews, not by their coming under the law, but by its abolition. Faith remains for all the sole condition of access to God, because Christ, in his death, blotted out the bond written in ordinances, nailing it, as the apostle expresses it, to the cross. The sufferings of the Christ are complemented by those of the followers who fill up that which is lacking. The implication is that his suffering and theirs are of like significance.

Acceptance with God is achieved not by works of law (which has been abolished), but through faith and the dwelling of Christ in the heart. In him we have our redemption from iniquity, and the forgiveness of our sins. Christ in us is the hope of glory (Col. 1:23, 27; 2:7; Eph. 1:13; 2:8; 3:12; I Tim. 2:5, 6; Tit. 2:14).

Finally, the death of Jesus not only has relation to the Jews and Gentiles; it is of cosmic significance. Through it it is God's purpose

⁶ Cf. Mark 10:45, and *Biblical World*, June, 1908, pp. 422 f.

to reconcile to him all things in heaven and earth (Col. 1:20; 2:15; Eph. 1:10).

Except therefore in emphasis, and a not unimportant extension of horizon, the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians and the pastoral epistles, by whomsoever written, reflect a conception of the significance of Jesus' death and of the basis on which sinners may be reconciled to God which is essentially Pauline. In Jesus God is so revealed to men that the ordinances of the law are done away, and men, whether Jews or Gentiles, may enter into peace with God through faith in Christ, who dwelling in them is the hope of glory. Thus does the Father, because of the love wherewith he loved us, deliver us out of the power of darkness and translate us into the Kingdom of the Son of his love.